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People's Daily and the reality of South China Sea territorial disputes

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Social realities can rarely be verified by means of pure observation or pure reflection. The reality of sovereignty of China over an island or maritime territory or the fact that China is determined to punish certain acts of aggression, cannot be smelled, seen or heard. Neither can they be deduced from pure logic or mathematics. Yet even empiricist political realists acknowledge sovereignty, aggression and threat as very real. As unobservables, these social realities exist in interpretations, which are often articulated, transformed and influenced by media reports.

This article reviews the most current representations of the most influential Chinese newspaper, the [*People's Daily*](#) of the basic tenets of the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. It looks at these representations as efforts in the creation of common understandings, and thus, social realities in the South China Sea. This review will also analyze the success of such efforts speculating the reasons why the *People's Daily* sometimes succeeds and sometimes fails in the creation of social realities.

The constitution of “normality” of Chinese “indisputable legal” sovereignty in the South China Sea

The Chinese territorial claims are often represented as “indisputable”. This formulation is clearly from the officials as it was first used by the Chinese foreign ministry that published a position paper “China’s Indisputable Sovereignty Over Xisha And Nansha Islands” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 1980). This official formulation is also repeated by *People's Daily* and the rest of the Chinese media: “(Chinese) Sovereignty (in the South China Sea) is indisputable” (Zewei, 2014). However, the Chinese position is emphasized as indisputable mainly to counter opposing claims and thus the rhetorical strategy of using the word indisputable is not convincing as it is clearly in contradiction with the context where the word is used.

The rhetorical strategies of articulation of the “reality” of China’s sovereignty in the Chinese media are not always as direct as they are when the word “indisputable” is being used. In some cases Chinese sovereignty is demonstrated in sentences that make sense only with an underlying assumption of Chinese sovereignty. Newspapers often characterize as “normal” such Chinese actions in disputed areas that would require permits from the sovereign authority. At the same time, similar actions by others or efforts to prevent China from conducting these “normal” actions are characterized as “illegal”. For example, one often repeated characterization about Sino-Vietnamese relations in 2014 has been the following: "Bilateral relations (between Vietnam and China) have been strained since earlier this year (2014) due to Vietnam continuously and *illegally* disturbing a Chinese company's normal oil drilling activities in waters near the Xisha Islands in the South China Sea." (Tao, 2014; Xinhua, 2014b, Italics by author). According to another instance, “A series of recent actions taken by Vietnam to disturb and play up the *normal* drilling of Haiyang Shiyou 981, an oil rig owned by China National Offshore Oil Corporation, in the waters off China's Xisha Islands has put tensions in the South China Sea in the spotlight of worldwide attention.” (Zewei, 2014, Italics by author). Of course the objective of such representations is to convince the reader of the normality of Chinese action and the illegality of the action of others, as this would imply an underlying assumption that these actions took place in the context of Chinese legislative control and sovereignty.

The use of the legal discourse could be somewhat powerful for the articulation of the “reality” of Chinese sovereignty over disputed areas, as legal judgments are sometimes taken uncritically. Defensive arguments by law breakers or those who defend them are often marginalized: of course all criminals claim their innocence, but we should not listen to their defense due to their need to defend and due to their unreliability as criminals.

However, quite as in the case of “indisputability”-speech, “normality” is in contradiction with the context of the normality-speech. When something is normal, one does not need to point to its normality, normal just is normal. However, when “normality” needs to be pointed to and hammered home, it no longer looks as normal.

The constitution of the setting of bargaining

In addition to the Chinese claim, the media participates in the articulation of norms and truth regimes about the ways in which the disputes in the South China Sea should be resolved and

managed. While the repetition of the indisputability of the Chinese claims may not convince the international community or the other claimants, it may affect the understanding of the Chinese position. Since the same interpretations of Chinese sovereignty are also repeated by the media focused on the Chinese citizens, media might also create a reality of unyieldingness if it manages to convince the Chinese side of the naturalness of Chinese sovereignty in the South China Sea. This is meaningful especially since China is big and as such other countries are dependent on Chinese goodwill. States that are dependent on Chinese cooperation need to accept the interpretation that enables cooperation. No matter how unnatural the Philippines or Vietnam consider the Chinese claim of indisputability or criminality of activities in disputed territories, economic dependence and fear might push them towards compromises in the area. Asymmetry plays to the advantage of China and media representations emphasize and create this asymmetry.

However, asymmetry works only if China interacts directly with its weaker neighbors. This explains why Chinese media representations articulate norms against foreign interference in East Asian territorial disputes. Balancing Chinese power with the power of the United States was formerly framed in the context of an imperialist interpretation of world politics. According to *People's Daily* on May 26 1950, Philippine President Quirino's remarks on Spratly Islands "is clearly a product of instructions from the United States government" (Cited in Lu, 1993, p. 36). Today, media portrays a picture of unfair extra-regional and hegemonic influence of the United States, but no longer frames this influence as imperialist. The main reasons China condemns US involvement are related to the US promise not to take sides, and to the destabilizing impact of "outsiders" in the Asian territory. In some media representations military support to China's co-claimants of South China Sea territories is even seen as a conflict move: "America should take note that this short-sighted policy of arms sales to China's neighbors will be taken as an example of indirect conflict." (Lifan, 2014) However, also more peaceful measures to draw external influence into the conflict resolution in the South China Sea have been associated in the Chinese media debate to instability and conflict. According to Yisheng in *People's Daily* "The Philippines persists with their attempt to grab the South China Sea, and have spared no effort to promote the use of international arbitration. But it should be aware that such actions will exacerbate rather than resolve the dispute with China." (Yisheng, 2014). It is doubtful, though, how much this semi-logical association of external influence and conflict can be credible. After all, the hegemonic interpretation in East Asia and in the international media seems to associate US balancing role with peace rather than war, even if this association is equally lacking

any logical foundation. It would probably be useful for the Chinese media, to change its strategy of trying to make external interference and conflict somehow naturally or logically associated and instead, refer to the history of East Asia, where external interference has empirically been associated with conflict escalation. While during the time of Chinese own export of communist insurgency and American export of anti-communist military power, Vietnam War (1955-1975) and Korean War (1950-1953) became far more serious threats to peace, after the [Association of Southeast Asian Nations](#) (ASEAN) declarations against external interference and China's new policy of respect for others' sovereignty, East Asia turned from world's most belligerent into world's most peaceful region (Kivimäki, 2014). Thus turning from "logical" association of interference and war into an empirical one could be more convincing for the Chinese media's attempt to exclude Europe and the United States from the South China Sea disputes.

While the exclusion of the US from the South China Sea disputes may be useful for China, it can only be done by using arguments that China can be committed to. However, while excluding the existing hegemonic power, China runs the risk of becoming dependent on principles that may later prevent its own power projection in the region and beyond. Meddling in issues of other states and securing one's interests outside one's own sovereign territory has been in the Chinese definition of hegemony. At the same time, China's own exclusion of US influence in East Asia has been based on the articulation of anti-hegemonic regional norms. Yet, with increasing global reach China is beginning to develop a need for its own power projection. According to Xiaochun and Jin in the *People's Daily* "Given China's strategic interests, especially in terms of its need to defend seaborne commerce, it's only *logical* that China is extending its reach into the Indian Ocean... That's a perfectly *logical* and *legitimate* security interest. China is going to seek access points, if not bases, for its military vessels to pull in for refueling, resupply and so on" (Xiaochun & Jin, 2014, Italics by author). The more logical and legitimate it is for China to meddle in Indian Ocean, the less possible it is for China to justify its framing of strategic asymmetry in the South China Sea. Diplomatic argumentation and the framing of world politics is, after all, very dependent on certain principles of consistency. It cannot be logical to associate US presence in the sea lines of communication (SLOC) in the South China Sea with conflict, and the Chinese presence in the SLOCs of Indian Ocean with peace.

China's diplomacy is also committed to good neighborly relations in the South China Sea. This principle makes it difficult, for the sake of consistency, to be explicitly threatening, i.e. use the power asymmetry openly. It is important for China's identity in the region to convince other countries that

“China has never threatened to disturb the peace in the region.” (Xinhua, 2014a). Thus asymmetrical bargaining in territorial disputes must take place by hiding aggressive choices and by portraying the enforcing acts as necessities or something that have been constituted by China’s opponent’s provocations. This way, it is the Vietnamese resistance to Chinese enactment of sovereignty that is portrayed as causing tension in Sino-Vietnamese relationship (Zewei, 2014), while in the Sino-Philippine relationship Chinese resistance against the Philippine enactment of sovereignty is a necessity and it is the Philippine action that is depicted as the cause of tension (Xinhua, 2014a). To some extent this, again, emphasizes the problem of consistency in the Chinese media representations. At the same time, as long as the Chinese media are not yet the standard media in regional politics - as the American media remain the hegemonic default sources of “objective information” - efforts of the Chinese media to naturalize China’s positions will fail.

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Web Resources

People's Daily: <http://en.people.cn/>

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): <http://www.asean.org/>